

# NOTES

## Etienne Lamotte, 1903–1983

With the death of Étienne Lamotte on May 5, 1983, we have lost a rare master, one responsible for the outstanding progress of Buddhist studies in the West. The sheer quantity of his published works is astounding. One also has to admire his wisdom in selecting major texts which he translated and explained in a way that can almost be considered as definitive. The accuracy and clarity of his writings attract an ever growing number of faithful readers. His popularity will be further enhanced when the projected translations into English of some of his major works make them accessible to a wider audience.

Behind this rampart of books, the personality of their author seems almost concealed. Lamotte was not adverse to this relative obscurity. His aspiration, constantly expressed but not much respected, was to remain aloof and free in order to pursue his studies. He admired what he called the “distinction” of such great spirits as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu who left no trace of themselves in their writings. *A fortiori* a translator and an exegete should do no more than to render intelligible *hic et nunc* what these great spirits have taught in distant places and times.

Born in Dinant, Belgium on November 21, 1903, Lamotte came from the rugged countryside at the edge of the Ardennes forest, close to the French border. During the Middle Ages, the Meuse Valley had been a seat of refined culture, but at the time of Lamotte’s youth, the Meuse River was known rather as a corridor for invasion. In 1914, this valley was the theater of massacres of the civilian population, the most notorious of which occurred in Dinant. In 1940, Lamotte witnessed the second burning of the library of his alma mater, the Catholic University of Louvain. At the time of the 1940 incident, thanks to international aid, this library had just been restored to much of its pristine glory after its first destruction in 1914. Only a few weeks before the second disaster struck, the University Library had acquired the personal library of the prominent Belgian Buddhist scholar Louis de La Vallée Poussin who died in 1938. In the spring of 1944, during a night bombing raid on Louvain, Lamotte miraculously escaped from the ruins of his lodgings at the Holy Spirit College. In the fall of the same year, Ave, his ancestors’ village, where his beloved father and sisters were living in the beautiful family manor dating from the seventeenth century, became one of the points reached by the Rundstedt army dur-

ing the murderous Battle of the Bulge.

Remembering these dark times and looking at the massive bulk of his publications, one can imagine Lamotte as a "*bourreau de travail*," austere, severe and exacting. It is true that he imposed a tremendous program of work on himself, but he liked to say that he never tired when exploring Buddhist texts. He used to add that, unfortunately, one hour devoted to pure research always had to be paid by nine hours filled with verification, handwritten transcription (he used neither typewriter nor fountain pen), proofreading and other uninteresting tasks.

The remarkable organization and power of synthesis in his vast *oeuvre* are striking. A closer reading reveals his power of concentration and the breadth of his information. Moreover, the fact that he never used filecards reveals amazing faculty of memory. All these qualities—his *vīrya*, *kṣānti* and *prajñā*—are indeed the qualities of the Bodhisattva whom he studied so extensively. As with the Bodhisattva, these qualities were accompanied in him by a simplicity of manner and a warm, comforting benevolence toward all. As he was a Catholic priest, his painstaking erudition, untiring energy and affable cordiality also remind us of quite a few saintly models in the Christian tradition.

After preparatory studies in Louvain and Malines, Etienne Lamotte's orientalist career started in Rome, in 1927, under the aegis of Carlo Formichi. His Roman sojourn was a consequence of his priestly vocation. A major impetus in his studies came from Louis de La Vallée Poussin who, though nominally Professor at the National University of Ghent, was living in Brussels, not too far from Louvain where Lamotte fulfilled a heavy teaching schedule, first at a Middle School and soon at the University. During a period of study in Paris, in 1931–1932, he studied under Sylvain Lévi, Alfred Foucher, Marcelle Lalou and Paul Demiéville; the latter became his intimate friend for almost forty years. Except for this brief absence, Lamotte worked in uninterrupted and close contact with La Vallée Poussin until the latter's death in 1938.

The years preceding the Second World War were full of intense activity. Both La Vallée Poussin and Lamotte produced a prodigious amount of publications, many of them interrelated. Lamotte focussed on the *Vijñānavāda*, contributing also important studies on *Madhyamaka* and *Vasubandhu*.

Lamotte almost always published his studies through the same few series: in Brussels, the *Société Belge d'Études Orientales* (SBEO) and its related *Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises* which publishes the *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* (MCB); and, more often, in Louvain, the University series the *Recueil (Conférences d'Histoire et de Philologie)* and the *Bibliothèque du Muséeon* (B. Mus.) which became, in 1970, the *Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain* (PIOL).

Of the studies produced before the Second World War, let us mention

Lamotte's *Notes sur la Bhagavadgītā* (SBEO, Paris, 1929), with a preface by La Vallée Poussin; and the two major Vijnānavādin texts: *L'explication des Mystères* (*Samdhinirmocanasūtra*), text-edition and translation of the Tibetan version (*Recueil*, 1935) and *La Somme du Grand Véhicule d'Asaṅga* (*Mahāyānasamgraha*), text-edition and translation of the Tibetan version with reference to the Chinese versions (B. Mus., 1938–1939; PIOI reprint, 1973). This last study was preceded by a joint publication of La Vallée Poussin's *Note sur l'Ālayavijñāna*, and Lamotte's *L'Ālayavijñāna (le Réceptacle) dans le Mahāyānasamgraha (Chapitre II)* in MCB III (1935), pp. 145–255. In MCB IV (1936), pp. 151–288, Lamotte published the *Traité de l'Acte de Vasubandhu* (*Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa*), text-edition and translation of the Tibetan version with reference to the Chinese version (T. 1609). In an appendix to this volume, he published the first translation of Chapter XVII (*Examen de l'Acte et du Fruit*) of the *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti*, the most comprehensive work of the Madhyamaka extant in Sanskrit, which had been edited by La Vallée Poussin in the *Bibliotheca Buddhica* and published in Saint-Petersbourg in 1903–1913.

Around the time of the Second World War, Lamotte's interest shifted to the Madhyamaka. He translated and annotated three important works of this school. Let us first mention the penetrating and paradoxical *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti* (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) (B. Mus., 1962), a work which was particularly dear to him. It can be recommended as the best introduction to his exegetical method as well as an excellent key to one of the masterworks of Indian thought. His translation was based on the Tibetan version with cross-references to the Chinese versions, particularly that of Hsüan-tsang.<sup>1</sup>

For the companion volume of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, *La Concentration de la Marche Héroïque* (*Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*) (MCB XIII, 1965), Lamotte chose to base his translation on the Chinese version by Kumārajīva and to include references to the Tibetan version.

The last of his great exegetical works is the copiously annotated translation of Kumārajīva's Chinese version of the *Ta chih tu lun*. Lamotte devoted a good part of his lifetime to this *Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra* or better *-upadeśa*). He first published volumes I and II (B. Mus. 1944 and 1949; PIOL reprint, by 1981 and 1982), followed twenty years later by volumes III (1970), IV (1976) and V (1980), in the PIOL series; volume VI with an index and a few addenda and corrigenda is in preparation. This French translation, well over 2,500 pages long, covers the first thirty-four *chüan* of the complete *Ta chih tu lun*. Lamotte chose these 34 *chüan* because they

<sup>1</sup> An English translation of this work, by Sara Boin [Webb], has been published: *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, in the Sacred Books of the Buddhists series, Pali Text Society, London, 1976.

represent a complete Chinese translation of the text from an Indian or Serindian original, while the remaining parts of the *Ta chih tu lun* are but a summarized or abridged version of the remaining chapters of the same work. The encyclopedic insight as well as organization and soundness of this huge didactical *summa* have earned it a genuine popularity in the Far Eastern tradition. These qualities did not fail to please Lamotte's intrepid, orthodox and clear-sighted spirit.

The work which probably has contributed most to Etienne Lamotte's international reputation is his *Histoire du Bouddhisme indien, des origines à l'ère Śaka* (B. Mus., 1958; PIOL, reprint 1976). This book of almost nine hundred pages is a landmark in twentieth century historiography. If we compare it with the previous publications of similar scope—not only with H. Kern's *Histoire du Bouddhisme dans l'Inde*, Paris, 1901–3, but also with the very critical studies by La Vallée Poussin such as, *Indo-Européens et Indo-Iraniens: L'Inde jusque vers 300 av. J. C.* (Paris 1924), *L'Inde au temps des Mauryas et des Barbares, Grecs, Scythes, Parthes et Yue-tchi* (Paris 1930), and *Dynasties et Histoire de l'Inde depuis Kanishka jusqu'aux invasions musulmanes* (Paris 1935)—we can appreciate the progress made by Lamotte. At last we have at our disposal a masterful synthesis and critical review of the vast scope of problems involved in the study of the development of one of the most important events in the spiritual history of mankind.

Unfortunately, the second part of this work, which was to cover the period studied in the third of the above-mentioned volumes of La Vallée Poussin, i.e., the period of expansion of the Mahāyāna, was not completed before his death. Foremost among the obstacles to its realization, was Lamotte's renewed interest for more exegetical type of research, as well as the numerous unsettled chronological problems, such as, for example, the date of Kaniṣka. However, in several important articles, Lamotte did present us with a few elements of the great unfinished enterprise. To mention but a few we have: "Sur la formation du Mahāyāna," in *Asiatica, Festschrift Fr. Weller* (Leipzig, 1954), pp. 377–396; "Le Bouddhisme des Laïcs," in *Studies in Indology and Buddhology presented in honour of Prof. S. Yamaguchi* (Kyōto, 1955); pp. 73–89; "Mañjuśrī," in *T'oung Pao* XLVIII (1960), pp. 1–96; and "Vajrapāṇi en Inde," in *Mélanges de Sinologie offerts à M. Paul Demiéville* (Paris, 1966), pp. 113–159.

This glance at the voluminous scholarly achievements, marked everywhere by the same unfailing attention to detail, covers only one side of the activity of Professor Lamotte. Generations of students of classical philology have known him only as a busy and good-humored teacher of Greek and Indo-European linguistics. His students in the field of Buddhist studies have never been numerous although the Buddhist curriculum of the Catholic University of Lou-

vain was attractive (it has unfortunately been discontinued after he became Professor Emeritus in 1974). Attracting mostly scholars from distant countries (Korea, Japan, China, U.S.A., Italy), Lamotte's teaching contributed to the prestige of the Belgian university abroad. The selection of Mgr. Lamotte as consultant at the Roman *Secretariatus pro non-christianis* can be regarded as a sign of discernment on the part of the Roman Catholic Church.

Too busy to undertake distant travels, Lamotte made his first pilgrimage to Asia only in 1977, at the invitation of the Japan Foundation. For the people he met here in Japan, it was an unforgettable experience to witness how the great scholar integrated into the framework of his incomparable theoretical knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and history such experiences as chance readings of inscriptions in the streets, popular worship and ceremonies in Buddhist temples or visits to the venerable Buddhist statuary of Kyoto and Nara.

How fond a memory Étienne Lamotte kept of this trip to Japan became apparent in his testament. He bequeathed his precious personal library, including many books enriched by his own annotations, to the Hôbôgirin Institute, the Japanese Branch of the French School of Far Eastern Studies (EFEO) in Kyoto. This generous gift concludes a life of devotion to Buddhist studies, a life that contributed to the world some of the finest achievements of modern scholarship on Buddhism.

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